

2026 PAID MEDIA PLANNING GUIDE: TURNING PEAK-SEASON WINS INTO ALWAYS-ON GROWTH ADVANTAGE



INTRODUCING YOUR MARKETING BUDGET SURVIVAL GUIDE



As brands prepare for the upcoming holiday season and [look ahead to 2026](#), they're finding that budgets are becoming more complex than ever. Rising media costs, evolving consumer behavior, and emerging commerce channels have changed the conversation. Simply repeating last year's strategies is no longer enough.

ROI is under high scrutiny from finance teams, while marketing leaders are being tasked with justifying increases against tougher economic conditions. Against this backdrop, [Q4](#) is expected to bring the slowest projected holiday growth since 2018.

This guide is meant to highlight the most important budget considerations for 2026 and beyond, blending data-backed insights with strategic recommendations. It recommends using frameworks to strengthen your case for finance teams, pressure-test your plans, and ensure your brand is well-prepared for a competitive and shifting landscape.



THE DATA: CHALLENGES, TRENDS, AND WHY THEY MATTER

Like any good marketing strategy, you can't plan a method of attack until you [understand the data](#) behind it. From media costs to conversion rates, quality creative to new methods of measurement, we're taking a deep dive into what's rapidly changing in the world of marketing.

MEDIA COSTS ARE RISING...

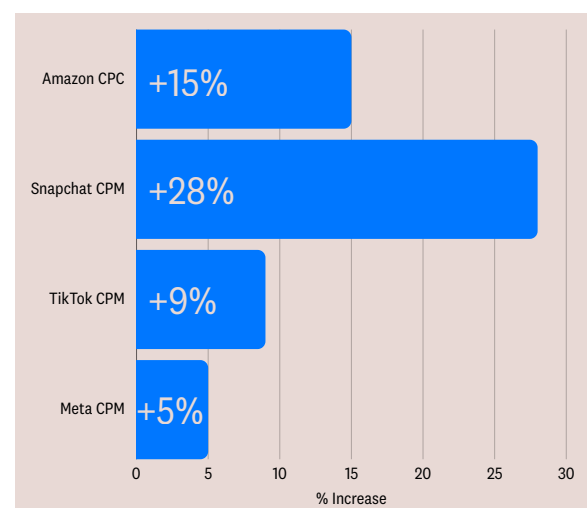
Ad auctions across both retail media and social platforms are getting [more expensive](#). From [2024 to 2025](#), Amazon CPCs rose 10–15% year-over-year, while CPMs climbed 27.6% on Snapchat, 8–9% on TikTok, and around 5% on Meta.

The picture couldn't be clearer: brands must now [spend more just to maintain the same reach](#). A flat budget as media costs rise means fewer impressions, fewer clicks, and more missed opportunities.

[Even modest increases in cost per click or impressions compound quickly across large-scale campaigns.](#)

The trick: your finance team needs to hear that this isn't just about doing more with less; it's about doing the same while buying less. It strengthens the case that static investment [into 2026](#) isn't a neutral outcome, but one that effectively erodes momentum.

Rising Media Costs 2024-2025 ([Guptamedia](#))



...WHILE CONVERSION RATES PLUMMET

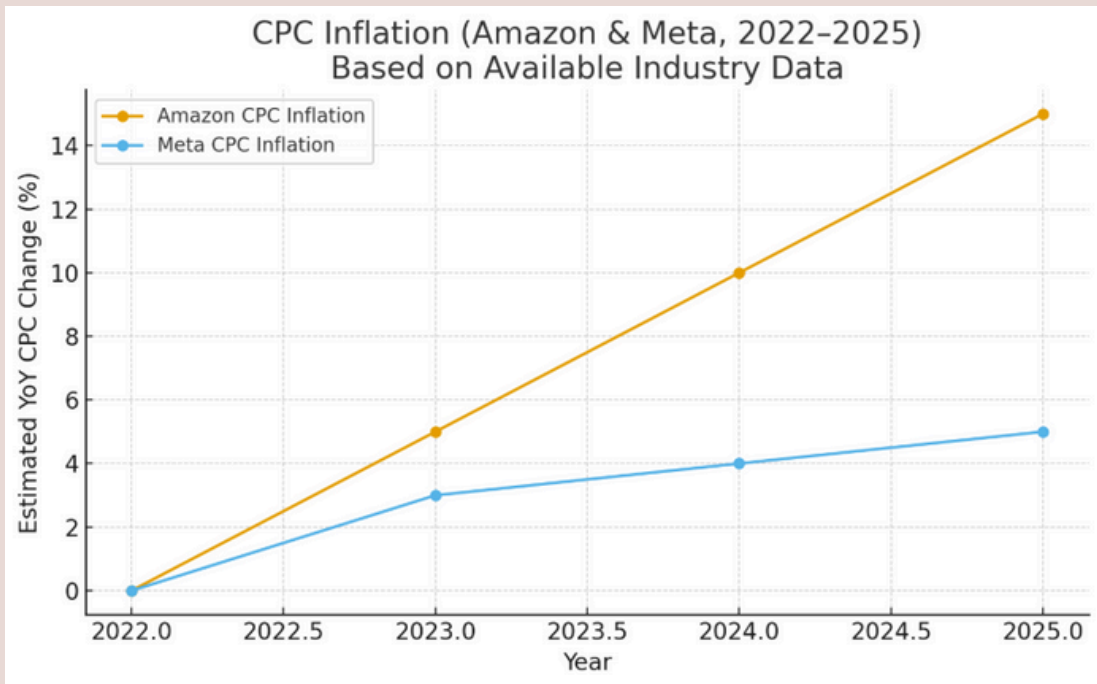


While ad costs climb, [conversion rates \(CVRs\)](#) across eCommerce continue to trend downward. Industry data shows that average eCommerce CVRs declined roughly 5-10% year-over-year from 2024 to 2025 as competition intensified and shopper behavior continued to fragment.

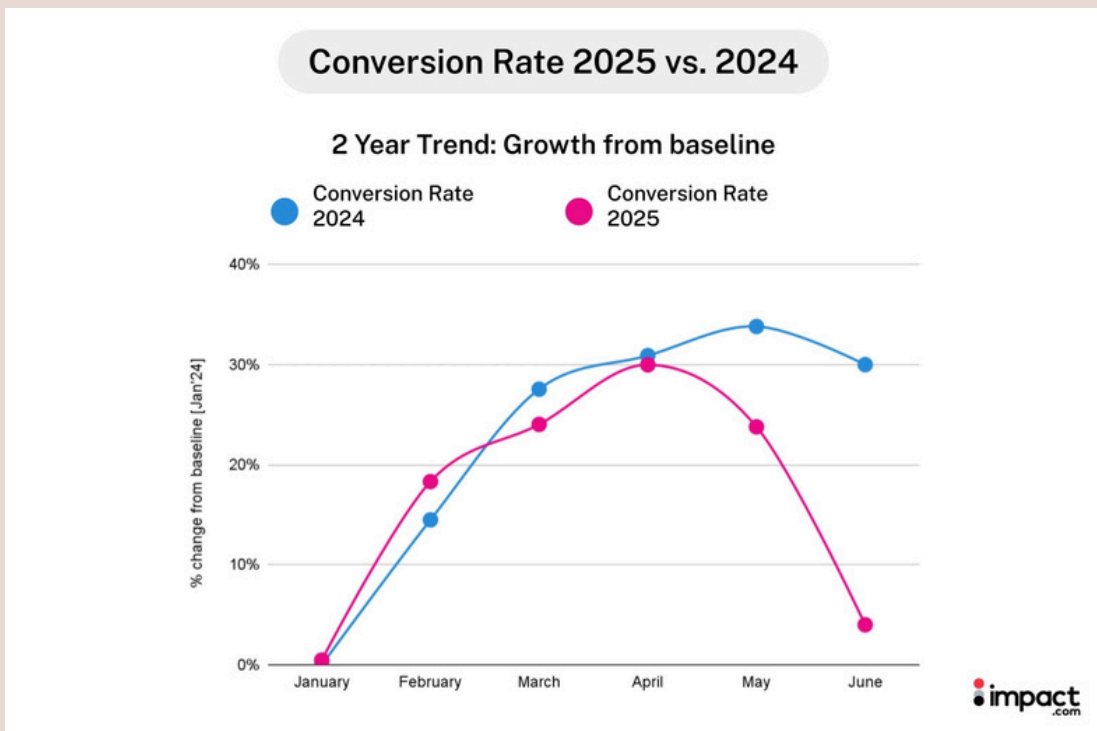
The implication is straightforward but consequential: expect to pay more clicks-per-sale to hit the same revenue targets. With [higher CPCs](#) and [lower CVRs](#), brands must invest in product detail page (PDP) optimization and DTC experience to protect their ROAS.

Investing in conversion-focused design and messaging now pays off faster than making marginal media tweaks. [Creative and PDP upgrades](#) matter as much as media.

CPC Inflation, Amazon & Meta, 2022-2025 (Seller Labs/Industry Data)



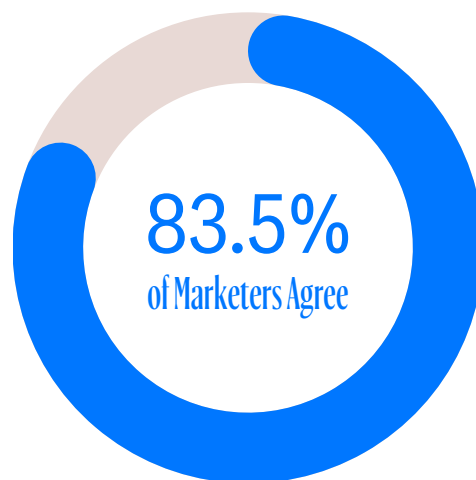
Conversion Rate 2025 vs. 2024 (Impact)



QUALITY CREATIVE IS THE #1 PERFORMANCE DRIVER

With targeting options becoming increasingly automated, the top driver of paid media performance has fallen back to advertising's superpower: creative that converts. Google's Media Lab states that **creative quality** is responsible for 70% of ad performance, while Nielsen research has found that strong creative contributes to 86% of sales lift in digital ads.

Creative Drives Advertising Performance ([TripleLift/EMARKETER](#))



Creative now **determines ROI** more than micro-optimizations ever could. Winning brands aren't outspending their competitors; they're out-creating them through sharper storytelling, stronger imagery, and faster testing cycles.

As platforms continue rewarding **relevance and engagement in 2026**, marketers should focus on creative iteration and message testing as core performance tools. Building modular assets, refreshing campaigns often, and tailoring creative to specific platforms now makes every ad dollar go further.



RETAIL MEDIA IS EXPANDING BEYOND AMAZON

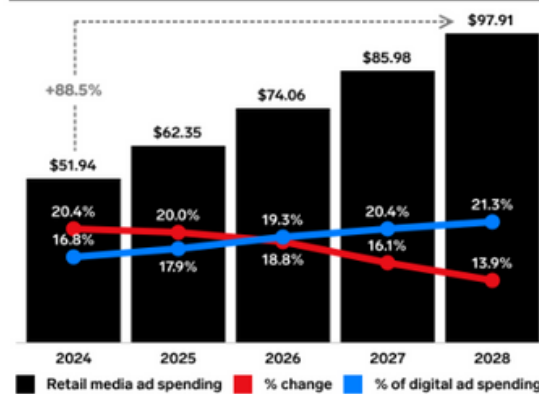
Retail media isn't just an Amazon story anymore. U.S. omni-channel retail media ad spend will reach \$61.2 billion in 2025, driven by growth across platforms like Walmart Connect, Target Roundel, and Instacart.

As shoppers blend online and in-store behavior, the average number of touchpoints in the buying process continues to rise. Today, the average number of touchpoints per purchase is 28.87. Consumers are moving seamlessly between retailer apps, search, and social before purchase, creating an omni-channel shopping experience that mirrors marketers' shift toward omni-channel marketing strategies.

US Retail Media Ad Spending, 2024-2028 (EMARKETER)

US Retail Media Ad Spending Will Increase by 88.5% From 2024 to 2028

billions in US retail media ad spending, % change, and % of digital ad spending, 2024-2028



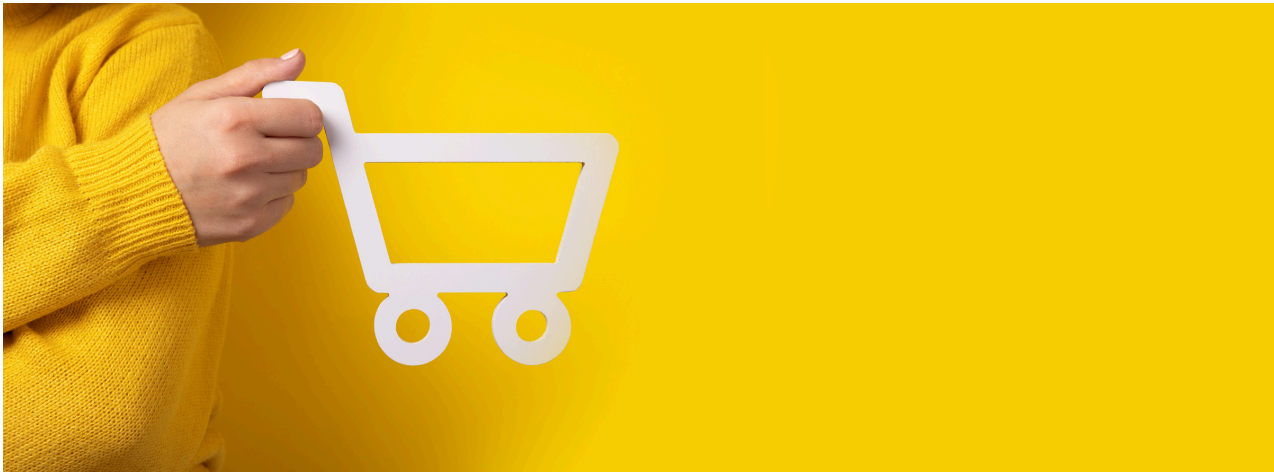
Note: digital advertising that appears on websites or apps that are primarily engaged in retail ecommerce or is bought through a retailer's media network or demand-side platform (DSP); examples of websites or apps primarily engaged in retail ecommerce include Amazon, Walmart, and eBay; examples of retail media networks include Amazon's DSP and Etsy's Offsite Ads; includes ads purchased through retail media networks that may not appear on ecommerce sites or apps
Source: EMARKETER Forecast, Nov 2024

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For brands, that means budgets should evolve beyond Amazon-only investment. A diversified retail media portfolio isn't optional but expected. Retail buyers now view retail media as table stakes for partnership and visibility.

CONSUMERS ARE DEAL HUNTING MORE



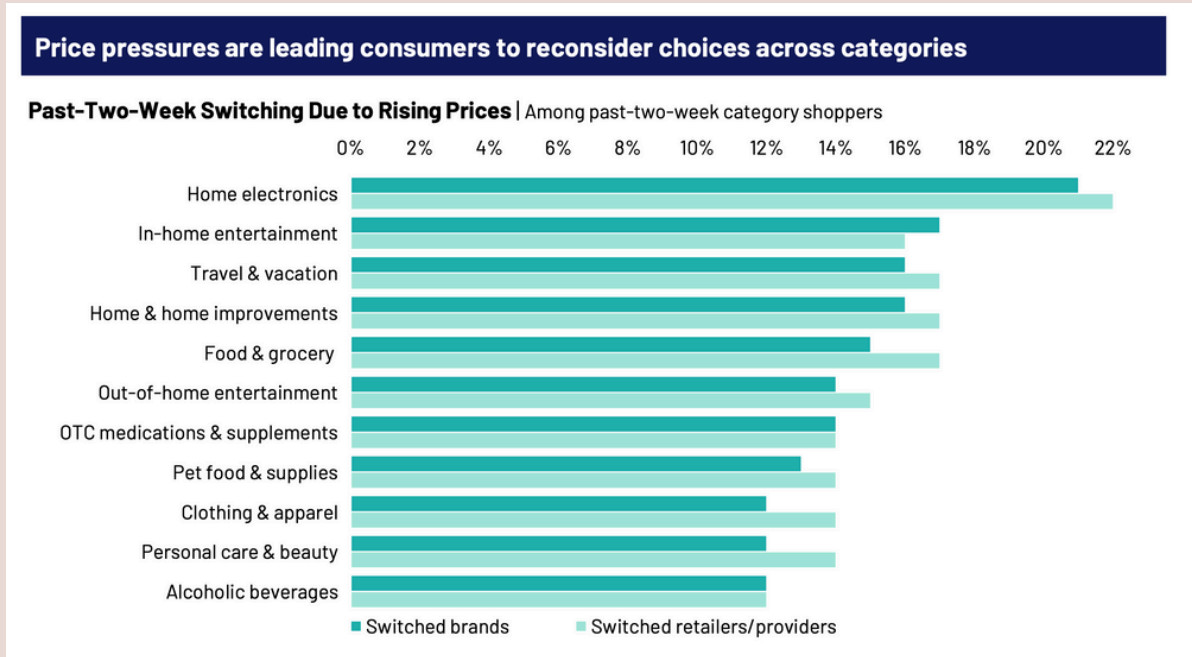
Consumer behavior is shifting in other ways as well under economic pressure. As inflation and cost-of-living concerns persist, shoppers are trading down by seeking cheaper alternatives, switching retailers, and hunting for discounts across categories like groceries and household essentials.

The data backs this up: **promo-driven revenue** has risen roughly 2–3 percentage points year-over-year, signaling that value and deal-seeking are now central to purchase decisions. Challenger brands, in particular, can capitalize by pairing strong promotional strategies with precise media activation.

To stay competitive, marketers should plan to coordinate media with promotional timing to avoid overlap or cannibalization. In this landscape, media alone can't carry growth, and promos without awareness lose impact. Plan for both **media and promotions**. One without the other underperforms.

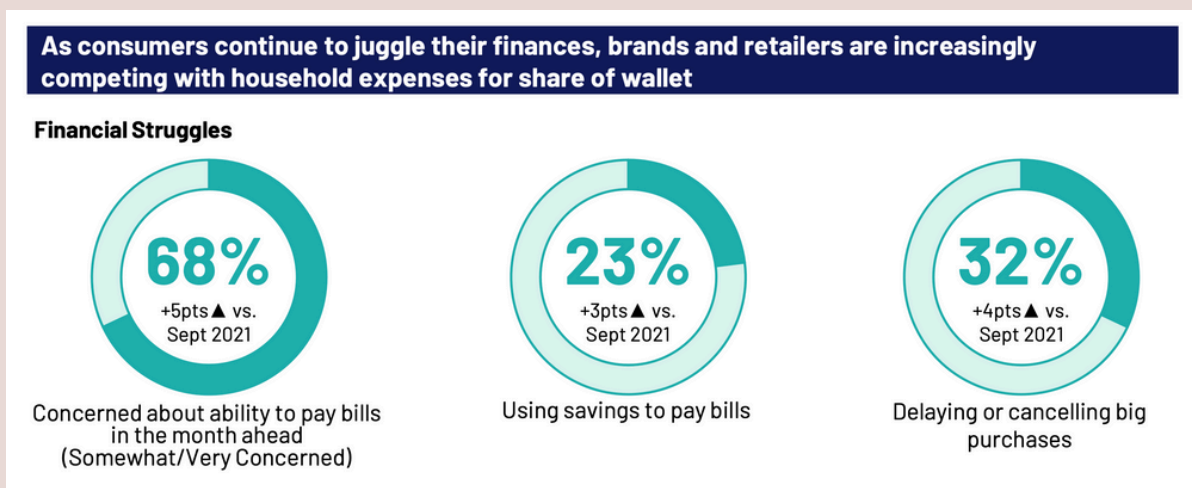


Price Pressures Are Causing Consumers to Rethink Their Choices Across Categories (Ipsos)



Source: (Ipsos)

As Consumers Manage Their Finances, Brands and Retailers Compete for Their Spending (Ipsos)

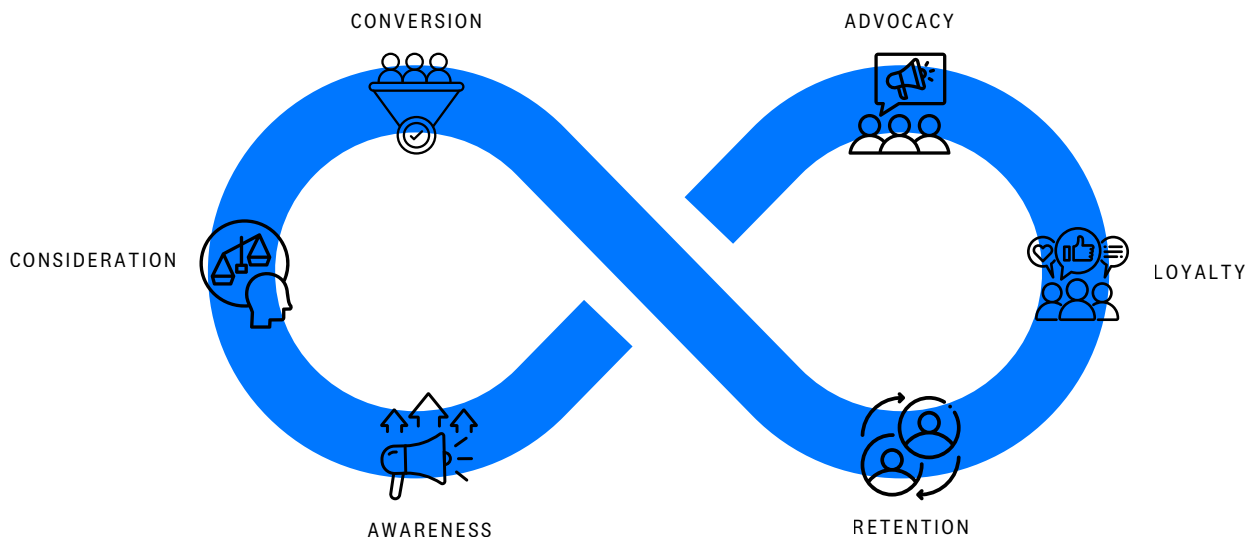


Source: (Ipsos)

MEASURING A FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE

The buyer's journey is fragmented across countless screens and touchpoints, with search, social, retail media, and in-store interactions all playing a role. The path to purchase is no longer linear, and last-click or first-touch attribution simply doesn't tell the full story.

The Consumer Journey Is No Longer Linear



To better understand the true drivers of growth, brands are turning to [multi-touch measurement \(MTM\)](#), [Amazon Marketing Cloud \(AMC\)](#), [Marketing Mix Modeling \(MMM\)](#), and [incrementality testing](#). These advanced methods are increasingly replacing outdated attribution models in both planning and performance reviews, giving marketing leaders the data they need to defend budgets and protect their teams during economic uncertainty.

Savvy marketers now recognize the need to budget for tools, data access, and team bandwidth to run and interpret these tests effectively. In times of economic scrutiny, credible measurement doesn't just prove efficiency; it earns trust.

[Credible measurement](#) wins incremental finance dollars.

SHIFTING SOCIAL MEDIA SELLING

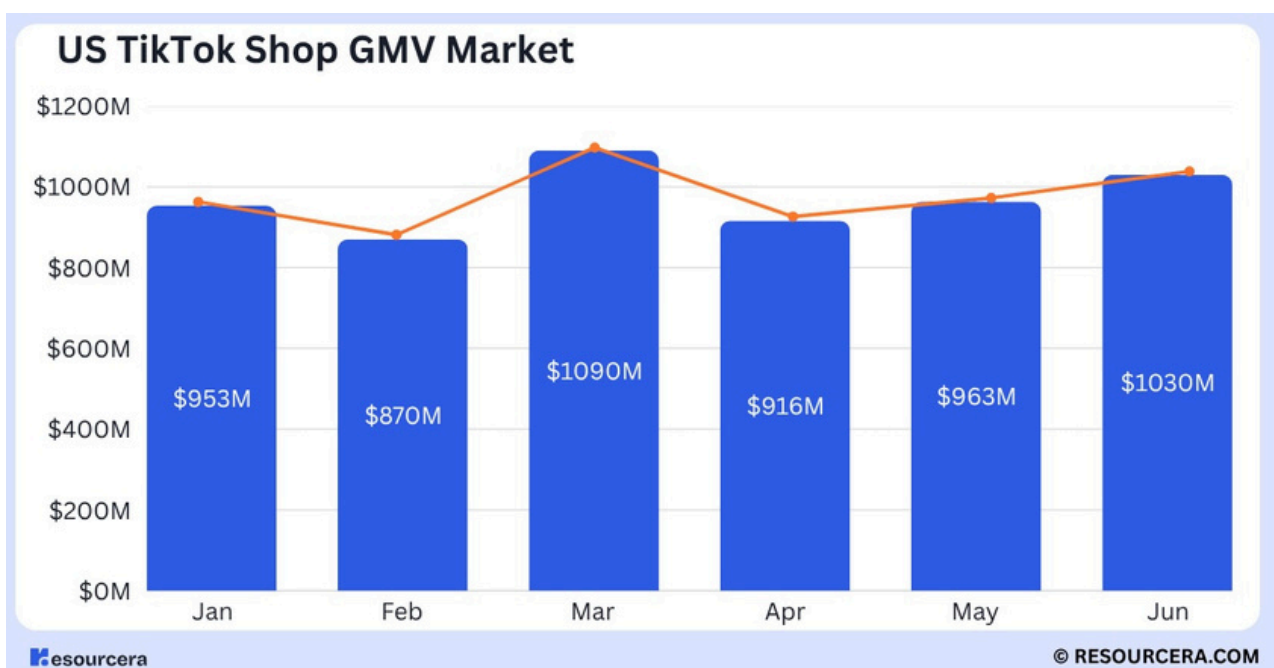
It's not just media and consumer behavior changing; social media's purpose is also shifting in this new landscape. Today, [social platforms](#) are no longer just discovery channels; consumers are buying directly from where they scroll. For example, [TikTok Shop](#) saw a global GMV growth reach [\\$33.2 billion](#) in 2024 (a 100% increase from 2023), and is projected to grow 100% again for 2025, reaching approximately \$66 billion by the end of the year.

The implication is clear: [social commerce](#) requires dedicated budget and planning. It's no longer a side experiment. Brands must account for creative, promotional activity, and operational support to make shoppable media campaigns effective.

In practice, that means integrating [TikTok Shop](#) and similar channels into your broader strategy.

Consumers are discovering and transacting in-platform; budgets must reflect shoppable media.

US TikTok Shop GMV Market for H1 2025 ([Resourcera](#))



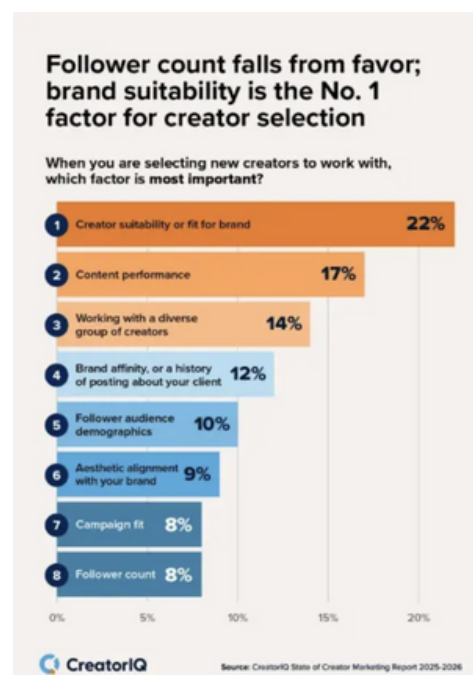
INFLUENCER MARKETING EVOLVES BEYOND AWARENESS

Brands are increasingly [turning to creators](#) as a core part of their media mix. [71% of marketers](#) report shifting more budget to creators, citing both strong ROI and the ability to generate high-velocity content, and average reported annual influencer marketing budgets have risen 171% year-over-year.

The days of using creators solely for brand awareness are over. Today's influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers are moving the needle in subtle yet profound ways. They produce fresh, authentic assets that feed [paid campaigns, affiliate programs, and omni-channel activations](#). By blending paid, affiliate, and creator efforts, you can unlock efficient content distribution that uses always-fresh assets, reducing the cost and time of production.

For marketers, this means [integrating creator strategies](#) into broader planning, tracking performance, and scaling collaborations that drive measurable sales. Influencer marketing will be far more powerful than just as an awareness driver in 2026; it will drive attributable sales and content for ads.

Key Factors for Creator Selection (CreatorIQ)

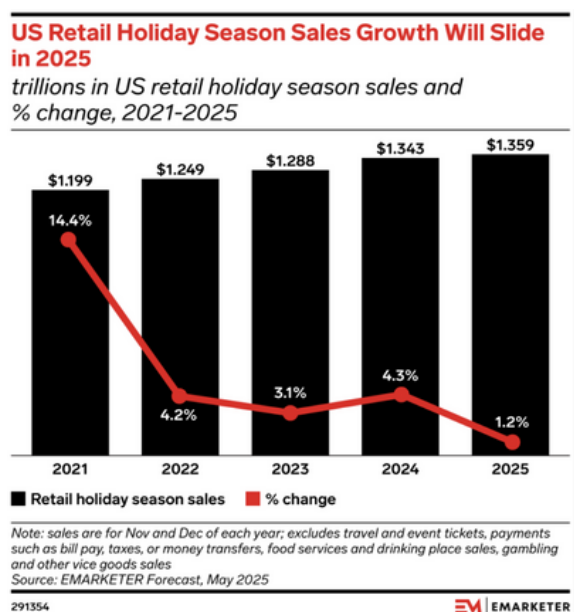


MORE HO-HO-HO, LESS BAH HUMBUG: NAVIGATING A SEASONAL SLOWDOWN

Marketers are about to face a [challenging peak season](#). According to the [National Retail Federation](#), U.S. holiday retail sales for the holiday season 2025 are projected to grow [only 2.9–3.4%](#). To put it into historical context, that’s the slowest holiday growth we’ll have seen [since 2018](#).

This year, brands can no longer rely on a strong Q4 to make up for earlier, weaker quarters. With consumer spending softening, efficiency, channel mix, and campaign pacing throughout the year will matter more than ever. Success in 2026 will come from [steady optimization](#), not last-minute pushes.

US Holiday Retail Growth Slowdown, 2021-2025 (EMARKETER)



Or to put it another way: a weak holiday means you can’t back-half your budget bets. Peak weeks won’t bail out underperformance, and marketers who are thinking bigger picture will better endure a more unpredictable holiday season than those who don’t. This doesn’t just apply to 2025; it’s wise to [start planning for next year](#) and beyond, preparing for optimization, and relying less on the holiday rush to save you.

INSIDE THE PAID MEDIA PLANNING GUIDE

We have covered the challenges and changing trends impacting marketing budgets and financial decisions. Now what? These tried-and-true strategies are the best practices that we recommend.

NEAR-TERM: Q4 2025 ACTION PLAN

#1. INVEST IN CREATIVE TESTING BEFORE PEAK WEEKS

To support omni-channel efficiency, [test a mix of creative formats](#) including branded, performance, UGC, and influencer during September–October. Launch small, rapid tests, then scale the winning creative during the holiday season.

#2. PROTECT MARGINS WITH SMARTER PROMOTIONS

[Margin-positive promos](#) still drive volume. Plan to favor bundles, thresholds, and loyalty-led offers over blanket markdowns.

#3. ALIGN SOCIAL COMMERCE WITH HOW PEOPLE SHOP

If you're not visible in shoppable feeds or high-intent placements, you're missing active buyers. [Invest across social commerce](#), product-level ads, and creator content, and shift spend toward the placements and devices where your shoppers convert most.

#4. INNOVATIVE WAYS TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY

Implementing AMC time-to-conversion data to create frequency-exclusion audiences or testing Performance+ or Brand+ can help [lower Cost Per Session](#) when competition is high.

2026 BUDGET FRAMEWORK (STRUCTURAL SHIFTS)

#1. REBASE FOR COST INFLATION

Flat budgets mean losing ground; growth budgets keep pace. Plan for [~10-15% CPC inflation](#) just to maintain reach.

#2. OPTIMIZE EFFICIENCY WITH A 15-20% TESTING BUDGET

Media dollars underperform without steady creative and [strategic testing](#). Invest in creative production and test new audiences, ad types, and retail media placements to stay ahead.

#3. DIVERSIFY YOUR RETAIL MEDIA MIX

Diversification keeps you where your shoppers actually convert. Try anchoring your ranges to the following:

- Amazon: [50-60%](#)
- Walmart/Instacart: [20-30%](#)
- Test and Learn: [15-20%](#)

#4. OPERATIONALIZE MEASUREMENT

Measurement is not a cost center; it's your proof to finance. Nurture it accordingly. Make your [AMC/MMM/incrementality reporting](#) recurring line items.

#5. SCALE CREATOR & INFLUENCER STRATEGY

[Creators](#) and influencers fuel both content production and commerce. Use a mix of flat fees, commissions, and paid amplification to maximize impact, and prioritize creators who deliver strong UGC, efficient traffic, and scalable performance.

PLANNING AND RISKS



SCENARIO PLANNING AND GUARDRAILS

Scenario planning keeps you agile, regardless of what finance approves. Use these budgets and suggested actions as a guide:

- **Flat Budget:** Focus on your core channels and creative refreshes. Limit your tests.
- **+10% Budget:** Add retail diversification and attribution pilots to your plan.
- **+20% Budget:** Expand your plan into creator, social commerce, and always-on testing.

RISKS OF INACTION

Doing nothing? Now that's the riskiest move you could take. Remember: **inaction equals decline.**

- Shrinking reach as CPCs rise
- Faster ad fatigue and higher CPAs without fresh creative
- Over-reliance on Amazon
- Missed shifts to social commerce
- Weakened credibility with finance from a lack of measurement

FINAL THOUGHTS



[Q4 2025](#) will test brands with slower growth and increased consumer price sensitivity. As you [plan for 2026](#), consider how your DTC, retail media, and social commerce strategies can support key business goals such as brand awareness, profitability, and growth. Align investment, targeting, and creative to build a cohesive shopping experience.

The path ahead requires larger and smarter budgets that focus on creative excellence and testing. This includes a robust creator and influencer program, investments in social commerce, ongoing user-generated content, and retail media diversification to achieve measurable ROI.

For marketing and finance leaders, the opportunity lies in using these insights to strengthen your internal case, align teams early, and proactively invest where growth will come from next year.

[Blue Wheel](#) helps brands pressure-test their plans, build cross-channel budget strategies, and unlock growth through data-driven decision making.

Ready to plan smarter for 2026? [Let's talk.](#)



ABOUT BLUE WHEEL

We're a new breed of eCommerce agency, supporting brands through marketplace management and performance advertising. With over \$2B in revenue managed for our clients, we'll help your brand from click to ship, scaling your brand's sales across DTC, Amazon, Walmart, eBay, and retail.

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